

Message Text

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SUBJECT: STECHFORD BY-ELECTION

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SUMMARY. THE CONSERVATIVE WIN AT STECHFORD WAS A SHARP BLOW TO THE GOVERNMENT, THOUGH NOT ENTIRELY UNEXPECTED. IT WAS EVEN MORE DAMAGING TO THE LIBERALS WHO SAW THEIR SHARE OF THE VOTE FALL BY NEARLY HALF IN THE WAKE OF THEIR POLITICAL DEAL WITH THE GOVERNMENT. PERHAPS MOST ALARMING, HOWEVER, WAS THE SHOWING OF THE NEO-FASCIST NATIONAL FRONT (NF) WHICH FINISHED THIRD, AHEAD OF THE LIBERALS, WITH A RACIST CAMPAIGN. INITIALLY, AT LEAST, THE ELECTORATE SEEMED TO REJECT THE GOVERNMENT/LIBERAL ACCORD, AND IN SO DOING PROBABLY STRENGTHENED ITS SHORT-TERM DURABILITY: NEITHER PARTY WISHES TO FACE AN EARLY ELECTION. WE ARE INCLINED TO BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT THE TRUE POLITICAL IMPORT OF THE PACT CAN ONLY BE JUDGED IN THE LONGER TERM -- IF THE EXPECTED ECONOMIC UPTURN MATERIALIZES, BOTH COULD BENEFIT. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE CONSERVATIVES SCORED AN IMPRESSIVE VICTORY IN THURSDAY'S (MARCH 31) BY-ELECTION IN STECHFORD WHICH WITNESSED A 17.4 PERCENT SWING TO THEM FROM LABOR OVER THE RESULTS IN THE LAST GENERAL ELECTION. ANDREW MACKAY, WHO AT 27 BECOMES THE YOUNGEST MEMBER OF THE PRESENT HOUSE OF COMMONS, RECEIVED 15,731 VOTES OR 43.4 PERCENT OF THOSE CAST, AND EASILY OUTDISTANCED HIS LABOR RIVAL,

TERRY DAVIS, WHO RECEIVED 13,782 VOTES OR 38 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL. VOTER TURNOUT WAS 58 PERCENT, REASONABLY HIGH FOR A BY-ELECTION.

2. EVEN MORE DRAMATIC WAS THE POOR SHOWING OF THE LIBERALS AND THE SURPRISING STRENGTH OF THE NATIONAL FRONT. THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE, GRAHAM GOPSILL, MUSTERED ONLY 8 PERCENT OF THE VOTE (CF. 15 PERCENT IN OCTOBER 1974), AND INDEED RAN FOURTH BEHIND NATIONAL FRONT CANDIDATE ANDREW BRONS (8.2 PERCENT). THE POOR LIBERAL SHOWING WAS AN OBVIOUS DISAPPOINTMENT TO DAVID STEEL, AND IS BEING INTERPRETED IN THE MEDIA AS A REPUDIATION OF THE GOVERNMENT/LIBERAL DEAL.

3. THE STECHFORD CONSTITUENCY SEEMS TO HAVE REACTED TO ECONOMIC ISSUES AFFECTING THIS DISTRICT OF NORTHEAST BIRMINGHAM, HEAVILY DEPENDENT ON THE AUTO INDUSTRY. DRAMATIC PRICE INCREASES IN FOOD AND GAS WERE COMMON COMPLAINTS REFLECTED IN MEDIA INTERVIEWS OF THE CONSTITUENTS ON THE EVE OF THE ELECTION. THE RECENT INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE AT BRITISH LEYLAND, WHICH IS THE LARGEST EMPLOYER OF THIS DISTRICT COMPRISED OF SKILLED MANUAL WORKERS, ADDED TO THE SENSE OF PESSIMISM. LABOR CANDIDATE DAVIS HAD COUNTED ON THE BUDGET MESSAGE TO BRING ALONG UNCOMMITTED VOTERS, BUT THE INCREASES IN ROAD TAX AND THE PRICE OF PETROL DID NOT SET WELL. LATENT RACISM AMONG LABOR VOTERS, REFLECTED IN THE NF VOTE, WAS ALSO AN ISSUE. A FINAL FACTOR IN THE STECHFORD ELECTION SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN THE REACTION TO THE GOVERNMENT'S PACT WITH LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE LIBERALS. WHILE THE DISSATISFACTION OF LOCAL LIBERALS WITH THE AGREEMENT ENTERED INTO BY THEIR PARTY WAS CLEAR BEFORE THE ELECTION, AN ORC POLL CONDUCTED BY THE INDEPENDENT TELEVISION NETWORK SUGGESTS THAT MANY LABOR VOTERS WERE LIKEWISE UNHAPPY ABOUT THE PACT. THE POLL, WHICH SAMPLED STECHFORD VOTERS AS THEY LEFT THE VOTING PLACES, INDICATED THAT OF THE 32 PERCENT OF THOSE WHO HAD VOTED FOR LABOR IN 1974 BUT DEFECTED THIS TIME, ROUGHLY HALF EXPRESSED DISSATISFACTION WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S PACT WITH THE LIBERALS.

4. THE TORY VICTORY AT STECHFORD MUST BE REGARDED AS A MAJOR BLOW TO THE GOVERNMENT. THE LOSS OF A "SAFE" LABOR SEAT IN THE MIDLANDS, THE CENTER OF ITS ELECTORAL SUCCESS IN THE PAST, MUST CONJURE UP OMINOUS THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FUTURE. WITH THE LATE ANTHONY CROSLAND'S SEAT AT GRIMSBY TO BE FILLED IN THE NEAR FUTURE, THE GOVERNMENT FACES THE PROSPECT OF LOSING YET ANOTHER SEAT. HARDLY A SAFE SEAT IN THE BEST OF TIMES, GRIMSBY COULD FALL TO THE TORIES

WITH ONLY A 7.7 PERCENT SWING FROM LABOR. WITH ITS

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NUMERICAL POSITION SLIPPING FURTHER IN THE COMMONS,
CALLAGHAN WILL BE FORCED TO RELY EVEN MORE HEAVILY UPON
THE LIBERALS FOR SUPPORT.

5. THE LIBERALS, FOR THEIR PART' HAVE FOUND THAT THE
STECHFORD RESULT HAS REDUCED THEIR ABILITY TO MANEUVER.
WITH HIS PARTY HAVING EXPRESSED ITS INITIAL OPPOSITION
TO THE PACT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. LIBERAL LEADER STEEL IS
IN THE DIFFICULT POSITION OF HAVING TO CONTINUE TO
SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT OR RISK THE CONSEQUENCES OF A GEN-
ERAL ELECTION WHICH COULD BE DISASTROUS FOR HIS PARTY.
AT LEAST FOR THE NEAR TERM, THIS SITUATION SEEMS TO
INCREASE THE DURABILITY OF THE LIBERAL PACT WITH THE
GOVERNMENT AND THE LIKELIHOOD THAT IT WILL BE RENEWED IN
THE FALL.

6 THE CONSERVATIVES OBVIOUSLY GAINED A GREAT DEAL AT
STECHFORD. IT HAS GREATLY STRENGTHENED THEIR HAND IN
KEEPING PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT. AND IF THEIR CURRENT
MOMENTUM IS SUSTAINED, WILL CARRY THEM THROUGH THE
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GRIMSBY BY-ELECTION AS WELL. THE RESULT ALSO IMPROVES MRS. THATCHER'S STANDING, AS HER "MEET THE PEOPLE" TRAVELS IN STECHFORD SEEMED TO AID HER CANDIDATE. CRITICISM OF HER PERFORMANCE DURING THE CENSURE DEBATE HAS LARGELY BEEN FORGOTTEN IN THE MOMENT OF PARTY VICTORY. STECHFORD, WHICH GAINED SOME LIMITED MEDIA ATTENTION SOME MONTHS AGO FOR HAVING A PUB WHICH HAS NOT SOLD A PINT OF BEER IN TWO YEARS (DUE TO AN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE), IS NOW ALMOST A HOUSEHOLD WORD DUE TO ITS DRAMATIC REJECTION OF THE LABOR AND LIBERAL CANDIDATES. WHILE THE LOCAL ISSUES IN THE FORTHCOMING GRIMSBY BY-ELECTION WILL BE DIFFERENT, THE OUTCOME COULD BE STRIKINGLY SIMILAR.

7. THE MOST SOBERING ASPECT OF THE STECHFORD CONTEST WAS THE NF'S SHOWING. OPERATING ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET AND RUNNING AN OVERTLY RACIST CAMPAIGN (THE TORY CANDIDATE MADE A SIMILAR, IF MORE DISCREET, APPEAL). IT DISPLACED THE LIBERALS AS THE THIRD MOST POPULAR PARTY IN A COMMUNITY WHICH HAD BEEN FREE OF RACIAL STRIFE. MOST ANALYSTS BELIEVE THE NF ATTRACTED A DISPROPORTIONATE SHARE OF DISGRUNTLED LABOR VOTERS WHOSE CONCERN WITH THE GROWING IMMIGRANT POPULATION WAS ONLY ONE OF SEVERAL SOURCES OF UNEASE. IT DOES, HOWEVER, ILLUSTRATE THE EXISTANCE OF LATENT RACIST ATTITUDES, EVEN IN RELATIVELY LOW STRESS AREAS.

8. WE BELIEVE IT WOULD BE PREMATURE TO WRITE OFF THE GOVERNMENT/LIBERAL PACT AS A POPULAR DISASTER FOR ONE OR BOTH PARTIES. THE FINAL JUDGEMENT CAN ONLY COME WITH A GENERAL ELECTION, AND THAT IS PROBABLY SOME TIME OFF. IF THE CURRENT ACCORD ENDURES AND THE ECONOMY IMPROVES OVER THE NEXT 6 TO 18 MONTHS, BOTH PARTIES COULD GAIN IN A GENERAL ELECTION, LABOR BECAUSE OF ITS PERFORMANCE, AND THE LIBERALS BECAUSE THEY GAVE THE GOVERNMENT THE TIME IT SO BADLY NEEDED. THUS AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL, BOTH

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PARTIES ARE HOSTAGE TO THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC POLICY AND BRITAIN'S INDUSTRIAL PERFORMANCE. IT IS NOT A COMFORTABLE POSITION, BUT FROM THEIR STANDPOINT BETTER THAN THE PROBABLE ALTERNATIVE, DISASTER AT THE POLLS.

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